

DAVID WALKER

In addition to Banneker's celebrated letter to Jefferson attention has already been called to a treatise on the evils of slavery as early as 1792 by a colored Baltimorean, known as Othello, which the Abbe Gregoire assures us was a work well worthy of consideration, and this together with the other instances of pen or voice adduced in the introductory show that even in the 18th century the blacks were beginning to voice their wrongs in accents unmistakable and strong. Rev. Coker who was the next of record among colored writers took even stronger ground in his little work on the same subject in 1810. He not only treated this question with great ability himself but gave a list of those of the blacks who had written on the subject before his day. Clever however as were these writers in logical presentation and debate, the effect they produced was as a mere zephyr to a West Indian hurricane compared with the upheaval which followed the appearance of the next work by a colored author on the same subject. Such was the fiery force of this little pamphlet that though it did not appear till the end (the 28th) of September 1829, it had brought on official contention by the following December, and by February only five months from publication the Legislatures of the two States of Georgia and Virginia had met in extraordinary secret sessions and passed laws making it a capital offence to circulate the pamphlet within their limits and setting a price on the writer's head!. The little booklet which caused this shudder of horror to shoot through the whole South consisted of but 76 octavo pages and is known as the "Appeal by David Walker, a dealer in second-hand clothes, and himself just long enough a resident in Boston, to give his publication a local habitation and name."

It is to North Carolina that we are indebted for the life of this extraordinary man; for David Walker was born at Wilmington in that State on the 28th of September (a date almost climacteric with him) 1785, and passed his younger days there. Walker was the son of a slave father and a free mother and according to the law (lege ventris) of the slave states, the child following the status of the mother was freeborn. He learned the art of reading and writing in his young days, as there was nothing but a lack of opportunity, against teaching blacks in North Carolina until 1833 long after his departure from that State and even from life. It ought in fact to be said at this juncture that in North Carolina a spirit of liberality existed earlier and longer toward the colored race than in any other of the South Atlantic States. We have already mentioned several able colored preachers to white congregations there in the early years of the 19th century, with one of them John Chavis, distinguished even more as the teacher of noted judges and statesmen there; and we might add further that not until this same 1833 several years after and in consequence of Nat Turner's Insurrection were colored men denied the right to the ballot in that State, and then only by a single vote after the hardest kind of an oratorical battle in the lower branch of the

legislature. But most of David Walker's earlier life is lost to posterity and in fact seems to have been almost equally so to his contemporaries; for his fame which is largely posthumous did not arouse a curiosity in his movements and antecedents until the man himself had got beyond our bourne of time and space. Though born a free man, Walker knew, and cherished an innate hatred of slavery and its degrading effects, and the awful impressions which its workings made upon his youthful mind seared themselves indelibly upon his memory throughout his life. Beside what he observed of slavery in and about his North Carolina home he added further to his knowledge of the system by travel and study in other slave-holding communities -

"Wondering from clime to clime observant strayed,
Their manners noted and their states surveyed."

He says himself in his preface:

After his peregrinations through the South for collecting his data, Walker shaped his steps to the Northward, well knowing that the message he had for his people must be delivered from afar. On his way North our subject seems to have put in some little time about Philadelphia where among others he met Bishop Richard Allen, head of the then newly organized A. M. E. denomination, and formed such an admiration for him as almost to make the Bishop the hero of his "Appeal". The great Methodist connection, though then scarcely ten years in being was already making mighty strides under his voice and saintly leadership/ and the young traveler rejoicing to see such splendid evidence of advancement, where but half-opportunity had

"Let low-born Allen, with his awkward shame,

Do good by stealth and blush to find it fame,"
hastened away to do in his own line some similar good for the oppressed. In fact Walker would seem to have been somewhat of a preacher himself and much of the intensity in thought and overpowering religiosity in feeling so manifest everywhere in his work is due to that fact.. At all events he reached Boston sometime in the year 1827 and became from that time a permanent resident during the remainder of his short life.

A short while after reaching Boston he opened a store in Brettel street where he carried on the business of renovating and selling second handed clothes. Walker began at once to manifest the most active interest in gatherings of colored people, being both a promoter and speaker on such occasions. Freedom's Journal

makes frequent mention of his racial activity during these years. (See April 25, 1828) Walker's name appears on the list with Rev. Thomas Paul as one of the two Boston agents and endorsers of that paper which fact shows him to have been not only already a man of influence there, but to have had a residence of sufficient time to win such influence. Indeed the amount of space given to Walker in the Boston correspondence for Freedom Journal would indicate that he was either the correspondent or the acknowledged leader in his race's cause among Bostonians of that day. Several extended accounts of what he had to say at the various meetings and one entire address are preserved to us in the files of this paper . ~~1828~~ (1828-29). He was especially active in the movement to redeem George M. Horton the slave poet which took place at this time, undertaking to raise some of the means by his own effort, and his contribution to that fund (See Freedom's Journal Oct. 3, 1828) was sufficiently large to be held up to others as a most worthy example to follow. During these years Liberian Colonization was at its height and the colored people in all the larger cities, having discovered its true purpose were arrayed against it. Walker took the lead in this matter among Bostonians both in calling and addressing meetings. The only one of his speeches to reach us was made on this subject before the General Colored Association of Boston, and printed on the 20th of December 1828 in Freedom's Journal. This address which appears elsewhere in full shows what the pamphlet makes more clearly evident, that Walker's mind was already deeply engrossed with measures to counteract the schemes of colonization and its mission.

. The title of this remarkable work ran thus: " Walker's " Appeal, in four articles, together with a preamble to the colored citizens of the world, but in particular and very expressly " to those of the United States of America. Written in Boston in " the State of Massachusetts, Sept. 28th, Boston: Published by " David Walker, 1829." The burden of the writer's message was the necessity of the free colored people's making common cause with the slaves and aspire to other than menial pursuits; for as both classes were one in race, they must in the end be one in destiny. Besides the preamble this little pamphlet was embraced under four headings:

- 1st- Our wretchedness in consequence of slavery;
- 2nd- Our wretchedness in consequence of ignorance;
- 3rd- Our wretchedness in consequence of the preachers of the religion of Jesus Christ;
- 4th- Our wretchedness in consequence of the colonizing plan."

It would seem, in fact, that colonization was the chief cause of the publication or at least its leading motive; for against the American colonization scheme as well as against Jefferson's disparagement of the blacks in his " Notes on Virginia", Walker arrayed all the force of ^{his intellect, giving them} entire precedence over the other divisions of the books. The work proved at once so popular as to call im-

mediately for a second edition; and the third was out by the 6th of the following March, 1830, less than six months after its publication. The final success of the work was probably due quite as much to the excitement it brought on at the South as to its intrinsic value. Such was the feeling caused by this brochure of 76 pages that by the 12th of December, 1829, the Mayor of Savannah, Ga., had addressed a letter of protest to Mayor Harrison Gray Otis of Boston with reference to the possible punishment of Walker. The Boston Mayor tried to belittle the author and his pamphlet adding "that notwithstanding the extremely bad and inflammatory tendency of the publication" the author had not made himself amenable to any law in Massachusetts. Walker, so far from shrinking from the authorities told Mayor Otis's emissary that the sentiments expressed in the books represented his true convictions and he meant to circulate his pamphlet by mail at his own expense through all quarters of the South. The letters to the Southern Mayor and Governor from Mayor Otis of Boston ran as follows

Boston, Feb. 10, 1830

TO THE Mayor of Savannah:-

Sir:-

Indisposition has prevented an earlier reply to your favor of the 12th of December. A few days before the receipt of it, the pamphlet had been put into my hands by one of the Board of Alderman of this city, who received it from an individual, it not having been circulated here. I perused it, carefully in order to ascertain whether the writer had made himself amenable to our laws; but notwithstanding the extremely bad and inflammatory tendency of the publication, he does not seem to have violated any of these laws. It is written by a free black man, whose true name it bears. He is a shop-keeper and dealer in old clothes; and in a conversation which I authorized a young friend of mine to hold with him, he openly avows the sentiments of the book and authorship. I also hear that he declares his intention to be to circulate his pamphlet by mail at his own expense, if he cannot otherwise effect his object. You may be assured, Sir, that a disposition would not be wanting on the part of the city authorities here to avail themselves of any lawful means for preventing this attempt to throw fire brands into your country. We regard it with deep disapprobation and abhorrence. But we have no power to control the purpose of the author and without it we think that any public notice of him or his book would make matters worse. We have determined, however, to publish a general caution to captains and others against exposing themselves to the consequence of transporting incendiary writings into your and the other Southern States. I have the honor to be

Your obedient servant,

H. G. Otis.

The following is the one sent to the Governor of Virginia at the same time:-

To His Excellency,
The Governor of Virginia.

Sir:-

Perceiving that a pamphlet published in this city has been the subject of animadversion and uneasiness in Virginia as well as in Georgia, I have presumed that it might not be amiss to apprize you of the sentiments and feelings of the city authorities in this place respecting it and for that purpose I beg leave to send you a copy of my answer to a letter from the Mayor of Savannah, addressed to me on that subject. You may be assured that your good people cannot hold in more absolute detestation the sentiment of the writer than do the people of this city, and as I verily believe the mass of the New England population. The only difference is that the insignificance of the writer, the extravagance of his sanguinary fanaticism, tending to disgust all persons of common humanity with his object, and very partial circulation of this book prevent the affair from being a subject of excitement and hardly of serious attention. I have reason to believe that the book is disapproved of by the decent portion even of the free colored population in this place and it would be a source of deep regret to me and I believe to all my well-disposed fellow citizens, if a publication of this character and emanating from such a source, should be thought to be countenanced by any of their number. I have the honor to be

Respectfully your obedient servant,

H. G. Otis,

Mayor of the city of Boston

Boston Courier

Feb. 26, 1830

So far from allaying the feeling, however, these letters unwittingly increased the spirit of uneasiness in the very quarters it was intended to reassure. Both the Georgia and Virginia legislatures took up the matter in secret session and made it illegal for free blacks to come into their borders, and a capital offence for any one to be found circulating pamphlets such as Walker's Appeal. Both the Richmond Whig and the Savannah Georgian took the legislatures of their respective States severely to task for holding special sessions to consider the contents of the pamphlet. This, from the Greensborough (N.C.) portrait in reference even to North Carolina may be taken as expressive of Southern feelings. "If Perkins steam-gun had been charged with rattlesnakes and shot into the midst of a flock of wild pigeons, the fluttering could not have been greater than has been recently felt or exhibited in the eastern part of this State by the lodgment of a few copies of this perishable production; even Governor Omens caught

the alarm the alarm and for aught we know was on the point of calling out the whole militia of the State to do battle upon - an old pamphlet." But no amount of newspaper criticism could shake the legislators from their purpose to pass laws against admitting the pamphlet within their State limits. We get a glimpse of what frame of mind the Virginians were in from the observations of an English writer who was then traveling in America and published his views later on in London. Saye he- " A pamphlet was lately published by a free colored man at Boston, named Walker, expatiating on the cruelty of the treatment to which men of color were subjected in many of the States which excited great indignation in the southern slave-holding States; and it so happened that upon the very day on which I attended the sitting of the legislature at Richmond, a letter from the Mayor of Boston in answer to a communication from the slave-holding States, declaring his disapprobation of the pamphlet, but at the same time expressing his opinion that the writer did not seem to have violated the law, was laid before the House. Mr. Tis, the Mayor of Boston, while in that letter he makes the declaration that the pamphlet does not contravene any law, with singular inconsistency adds in his public letter that he regards it with deep disapprobation and abhorrence. This seemed a strange communication from a magistrate in a non-slaveholding State. A bill was immediately brought into the House of delegates here, which from its title, ' To prevent the circulation of seditious writings' I should rather have expected to be proposed in some other country than this. The fate of this bill I never knew. I was anxious to see the anti-slavery pamphlet which was making so much noise, and went into a bookseller's store of the name of Scaraway or some such name, as I think, but found his prejudices were as strong as those of any of his countrymen. ' Any man that would sell it should (he said) be gibbeted'. (See James Stuart's " Three years in North America Vol 2 pp 54-55)

Walker sent a copy of his " Appeal" to the " Genius of Universal Emancipation," which Benjamin Lunday with the editorial aid of Garrison was then publishing at Baltimore but owing to its inflammatory nature as was thought at the time, no notice was taken of the work by editor Garrison. It was not until the great furore had been raised over the book at the South that Mr. Garrison thought it worth while to notice the " Appeal"; and then he frankly declared: " We have had this pamphlet on our table for some time past, and are not surprised by its effect upon our sensitive Southern brethren. It is written by a colored Bostonian and breathes the most impassioned and determined spirit. We deprecate its circulation, though we cannot but wonder at the bravery and intelligence of its author. The editor of the Whig must not laugh at Gov. Giles; his alarm was natural."

Mr. Garrison made one or two other short comments on the "Appeal" while editing the "Genius" but saved his matured judgment on the work for the opening issues of the Liberator at the beginning of 1831. And even here the ball was started to rolling by another, a Philadelphia correspondent signing himself Leo (Lib. 1 page 17) who in a letter said among other things:

"I am opposed to the pamphlet in the first place not because he is a man of color, but because I do not believe he wrote it; for the matter brought forward in the pamphlet is the result of more reading than could have fallen to the lot of that man and at the same time have left him so vulgar as he has been represented to me; (2) "besides, Sir, he could never have read all the authors quoted in his book and seen of what true greatness con-

sisted and then bestowed such unbounded praise upon one whose name the political, the moral, and the religious world will be found equally indifferent about handing to those who may come after us." besides his criticism of the speeches of our best orators showed much wider reading and a larger conception of literature in general than he could possibly possess.

To this Mr. Garrison hastened to reply: ~~that~~ "We know not wherein we differ from Leo in his view of the pamphlet; we have repeatedly expressed our disapprobation of its general spirit. It contains, however many valuable truths and seasonable warnings. (2) ^{unknown} We are surprised at his incredulity. Mr. Walker was personally ^{to us}; but we are assured by those who intimately knew him that his "Appeal" was an exact transcript of his daily conversations; that within the last four years, he was furthfully indefatigable in his studies; that he was not 'vulgar' either in manner or language; and that he was a blameless professor of religion. The historical facts which he has collected were too familiar to have required extraordinary research. besides the ~~inter~~ evidence of the pamphlet clearly substantiates its authorship. We cannot find that there is any other individual extolled than the venerable and worthy Bishop Richard Allen of Philadelphia. Surely our correspondent cannot mean to deny him the tribute of merit which Mr. Walker has bestowed?

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Walker says in the second part of his "Appeal": "There have been and are this day in Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore colored men who are in league with tyrants and who received a great portion of their daily bread, of the moneys which they acquire from the blood and tears of their more miserable brethren, whom they scandalously delivered into the hands of our natural enemies." This sentiment we have seen expressed by other writers notably David Ruggles, about the same time. Not only were men said to have been sold or delivered to pursuers for stated sums, but are said to have been put out of the way for small considerations. Garrison himself, narrowly escaped being kidnapped by the colonizing and slaveholding influence when he landed in New York in 1833 on his return from his ^{anti} colonization crusade in England. (See Garrison by his sons, Vol 1, pa 183)

Whatever may have been the cause, David Walker died quite suddenly on the 28th of June, 1830, only a few months after the appearance of the third edition of his work. Indeed there was much talk of foul-play at the time of his death, and the idea still lingers at least in tradition that Walker was the victim of those eager to secure the price set upon his head at the South. His death would seem to be a verification, therefore, of his own prophecy, and he may therefore be regarded as the first martyr to the cause of the slave.

Walker was living in Bridge St. West Boston at the time of his death where after his marriage in 1828 he had settled down to a life of earnest endeavor in conducting his clothing business and distributing his pamphlet. He was a devout christian and a regular member of the A. M. E. Church then presided over by Rev. Father Snowden. Our subject was a most active and industrious man which as already hinted, was thought to have contributed somewhat to his early death. David Walker was not only an unusually laborious and plodding student, but was brave and daring with an innate hatred of oppression. His bold utterances frightened the South at the time as well they might, and there is no reason to believe that he would not have headed an insurrection by the slaves had he seen the slightest chance to succeed. His son Edwin Garrison Walker, who as a lawyer and public man was even better known than his father's ^{had a} zeal in the cause of liberty and fearlessness in championing it.

Though doubtless an earnest and sincere man, Walker was not over-qualified as a thinker, and not very wisely regarded for a colored man even in his day.

He sensed however the true object of the American Colonization Society, and shared with Rev. William J. Watkins of Baltimore the honor of being the first colored writer to arraign that Society as inimical to the welfare of the free-people of America.

It was for what he knew about slavery and his deep conviction, and fearlessness in expressing it, that caused his booklet to be so much dreaded. While he could not boast the polish of some of the men who came in the decade immediately following him, he yet left us no successors to fiery indignation and deadly exposures of his pages. Walker was the John the Baptist or Peter the Hermit of the Antislavery Crusade, while his epistle may well be called the Sermon on the Mount of the Cause.